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## THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE HIGH SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

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A few months ago a manager of a teachers' agency, a man of considerable knowledge of schools and teachers throughout southern New England, was speaking to me upon the significance of the concerted movement of school superintendents in Massachusetts within the past five years to correct what has seemed to them the too great independence of the high school, to articulate it more closely to the rest of the school system, and to bring it more consciously and confessedly under their oversight and authority. As to the fact that superintendents are honoring the high school with a larger share of their time and attention than formerly, I suppose there is no question, whatever the reason may be, and I imagine that few of us have failed to notice the increasing pressure from the power above us, or have been allowed to forget that we are not independent masters of independent schools, but are officers in a system which is organized under a supreme central authority. This relationship of ours to the general school system as a fact is one with which we have no quarrel; it has its advantages and its disadvantages, like many other relationships, and we are perfectly familiar with it. It is the way in which this fact is being forced upon the attention of some of us, and the advantage that is being taken of it to affect our individual freedom and our professional status, that chiefly concerns us.

The problem that confronts the superintendent of schools is one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, that any civil authority in the United States has to work out. He is himself, in the mind of the law, the one generally unnecessary unit in the school system. He is made possible by a permissive statute—I am speaking, of course, of Massachusetts law—and is the creature of the school board that appoints him. Of that board he is not a member, and has no voice in its deliberations except by its request or consent. He has no

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Head Masters' Club of Western Massachusetts.

inherent power or authority, and no legal responsibility. He is the agent of the school board. Whatever authority he exercises is delegated, and is subject to correction or instant reversal by the body that gives it. He is as subject to the will of that body, and more directly so, as is the humblest teacher in the entire teaching force. And yet the power and authority that the superintendent actually does exercise are complete and autocratic. If he has the confidence and support of the school board, and especially if he succeeds in making direct communication between the school board and the teachers difficult and infrequent, he exercises in the legislation of that board the powerful initiative of a little prime minister, and wields in the administration of the schools the scepter of a little czar. I do not think of any civil magistrate in the United States or in any of the individual states who is in possession of an authority at once so absolute and far-reaching as that which may be exercised by a superintendent of schools.

The problem of which I spoke consists in the adjustment of this extraordinary authority to the rights and sensibilities of the teachers who are placed beneath it. It is not at all a question of the existence of that authority; it is a question of the proper way of exercising it; and this question, I repeat, is a very difficult one. The superintendent of schools finds, or may find, in his high school—for that is the only department under his jurisdiction with which this paper is concerned—a body of men and women some at least of whom—to speak within bounds—are his equals in ability, education, culture, and social position. It is not inconceivable that in one or more of these qualities they may occasionally surpass him. Of educational theory, as far as it is related to the work of secondary schools, they not infrequently know as much as he knows, and in all that concerns the practical work of their separate departments they are very likely to know more than he does, oftentimes a great deal more.

The very statement of these incongruous conditions, absolute authority on the one side with personal and vocational equality on the other, shows how wise and delicate an adjustment is needed to bring them into an easy balance, and how real the dangers are that constantly threaten the peace and efficiency of parts of our educational system.

The first and most self-evident of these dangers is that of the unwise

interference of the superintendent with the work of the high school and of its individual teachers. One of the most distinguished superintendents in Massachusetts is reported to have said on a public occasion that a superintendent should be able to take any class in any subject in the high school under his charge and teach it better than the regular teacher of that class. I did not hear the superintendent make this remark; it seems almost incredible to me that he could have made it, or anything like it; but if he did say it, it simply shows that in the inscrutable orderings of Providence a wise man may be left to make a very foolish speech. The only possible importance such a statement could have would be in its chance influence upon men of inferior caliber. Some superintendent might arise conceited and ignorant enough to imagine that he could do exactly that thing, and then the mischief would be to pay. Fortunately this is very unlikely to happen, although I have seen superintendents to whom this relationship between superintendent and teachers seems the eminently desirable and fitting one, and who would welcome and encourage the growth of such an impression in regard to themselves among the teachers under their control. I shall make no attempt to classify what may be called cases of "unwise interference." They differ with the individual superintendent, high school, and teaching force. They may include changes in the course of study without sufficient knowledge of the needs and conditions of the school, or without proper weight given to the views and judgment of its faculty. It may be some rearrangement of the school machinery based upon a doctrinaire conception of what is ideal instead of what is known to be practical. It may be an attempt to enforce some method of teaching that is unfitted to the personality of a particular teacher. It may be an assumption of sufficient knowledge to select the textbooks to be used in the different departments, forgetful that a good workman should be a good judge of his own tools. It may be the effort to have cases of discipline brought more directly under his survey. It may be simply the itching desire to have a finger in everything that goes on in the high school, to have nothing a little out of the ordinary happen there that he does not know all about, and to regard any exercise of initiative on the part of the master as an evasion of his authority and an infringement on his prerogatives.

These instances, and many others, are examples of what may happen and is happening under a vigorous movement on the part of superintendents to bring high schools more thoroughly under their control, and high-school men will gain nothing by shutting their eyes to the facts. No one questions that the jurisdiction of the superintendent includes the high school as fully as it does the lowest primary grade. Neither does anyone doubt, I think, that the superintendent is in a position to do the high school most important service, or that his advice and criticism may come to an individual teacher with a weight and effectiveness which no one else is in a position to bring. Nor will anyone deny that there are high schools, and many of them, which need careful overhauling and supervision by a competent superintendent. All this goes without saying. Nevertheless, as far as my experience and observation go, the value of the superintendent's work in general is least apparent when it is directed toward the control of high-school affairs, and it is in that department that he most frequently displays the greatest lack of wisdom in his decisions what to meddle with and what to let alone. The natural and sufficient reasons for this are implied in what I have said before, that in attempting to take the lead in the management of the high school, or in the direction and conduct of its work, he is dealing with questions, conditions, and needs of which, from the very nature of the case, he is likely to know considerably less than those who have these matters directly in charge; and unless he is unusually wise, discreet, and conscious of his own limitations, his efforts, however well meant, are liable to be followed by a degree of irritation and wasted time and energy on the part of his subordinates very largely in excess of any good that he has done.

A second danger has to do with the relation of the high school to the school system of the city or town. I will call it the violation of the integrity of the high school.

Any master who has had experience as a schoolboy or teacher in an academy of repute carries away with him a sense of a common institutional life made fragrant and beautiful by the traditions that cluster about it, and the jubilant loyalty of its sons that springs up and overshadows it. He feels that this sense of membership in a body that stands out in individual distinctness, impressing itself upon its

members not only through its present, but through its past, and dignifying every boy that comes into it, not only in his own sight, but in that of his little world outside, with the seal of its own name and history—he is sure, I say, that this sense is a definite emotional and moral possession, working in its own way for honor and devotion to ideals.

The high school, however, is different. He finds there an institution in most cases without either name, history, or tradition; that is, name, history or tradition essentially different from that of hundreds of other high schools of the same or similar grades. It is impressed upon him that he is a closely interlocked part of a great system which has no personality whatsoever, is distinguished in its parts by numbers, is expected to run with the smoothness and regularity of a machine, and is put forth to the world indeed as the supreme product of the American inventive and mechanical genius. From this point of view, it is truly remarkable and admirable, but it is as soulless as a corporation. Nobody can cherish sentiments of loyalty and affection toward a system, or flame into enthusiasm over Grade 6. Just here comes a collision of theories. The master of the high school would make his school a distinct entity. He would have the pupils in the grades feel that the high school is a school by itself, as distinct and separate in a way as the college. He would have the boy or girl look forward to his high-school course as to almost a new life, certainly something apart in its coherence and individuality from that to which he has been used. He would have them surrounded with a new set of names, symbols, and ceremonies. He would have them forget for the time being that they belong to the public-school system or to any system, and would have them feel, if it were possible—which it is not—that they have entered into a body social which in its own sphere and to its own extent is complete, self-perpetuating, different from all other schools in the world, and in possession of the true marks and notes of an alma mater. In this way he believes that the great, undying sense of corporate and spiritual membership in a living organism—a sense that I have called a moral and emotional possession, in early life a joy and strength, in later years a quickener of hardened and dying sensibilities, a sense that every college man knows, and I believe in almost greater degree every graduate of an

endowed school, academy, or seminary, being in the case of the latter the dominant mark of difference between him and the product of the public school—he believes, I say, that this sense might become a part of the life of the schoolboy and schoolgirl in the four years that they spend in their high school.

It is quite possible that the master's dream is a trifle iridescent and his views are somewhat extreme. At all events, he is not likely to do much damage with his vagaries—if such they are, for the forces arrayed against him are too strong. It is indeed interesting to notice how every one in authority over the public-school system—superintendent, school board, mayor—seems concerned to clear away from its smooth and glittering surface every trace of sentiment that may have gathered upon it from the outer air. To any such conception of the high school as I have outlined the modern superintendent is unalterably opposed. It is in his mind antagonistic to two cardinal principles, one of which is that the symmetry and completeness of the “system” must not be interfered with even in theory, and the other, that the passage from the grammar grades to the high school must be made to the young student as easy and natural as possible. The superintendent in his addresses and reports bearing upon graduation from the high school rarely if ever intimates that the successful candidates for diplomas are graduates from an institution or a school with an honorable history of its own; he is careful to remind them that they have now emerged from the top of a prolonged and carefully constructed system, an elaborate mechanism, into which the community plunged them in early childhood and from part to part of which they have been led for thirteen long years, until this final stage has turned them out as the completed product of the entire process. So in smoothing the way from the lower grades to those of the high school the pupil in the last year of the grammar school is told with emphasis that the high school is to be looked upon as the natural and inevitable continuation of his present year; that it is really nothing but Grades 10, 11, 12, and 13 of the school system with which he is already thoroughly familiar, and is in no sense a separate institution. So eager and enthusiastic is the present generation of superintendents to bring about what they call the natural connection and co-ordination of different educational grades that I look forward to overtures on their part to induce the New

England colleges to allow themselves, for example's sake, if nothing more, to be presented to the public Grades 14, 15, 16, and 17. I must not be understood as attacking or underrating our system of public schools or as opposing the natural progress—for those to whom it *is* natural—of the pupil from the grades to the high school. I simply contend that neither the perfection of the system nor the unimpeded progress of the pupil requires such a conception and presentation of the high school as is destructive to its integrity as an institution; and that the average superintendent in so conceiving of it and so presenting it to the mind of the public and the children of the public is working against that integrity and causing a moral and ideal loss vastly in excess of any gain to the system or any part of it.

A third danger, and the one that I consider most serious of all is the degradation of the professional spirit in public-school teaching. I say without hesitation that under the present order of things it is absurd for high-school men to speak of their calling as a profession or of themselves as professional men. We may call ourselves high-grade employees, nothing more. This is not the case with all teachers, I am thankful to say. It is not so with college men and women; it is not necessarily so with teachers in private and endowed schools. That is, when teaching falls from the dignity of a profession, admitting that it has ever attained that dignity, it does so owing to the conditions in which it finds itself, and through which it loses one or more of the marks that are essential to a true profession. Among these marks none have been more conspicuous and indelible in the history of the ancient professions than freedom of initiative and action on the part of the individual, subject to occasional restriction only by the voluntarily accepted authority of the organized body of his professional equals. There is never a hint of an individual, autocratic authority above him the weight of which he may be conscious of every working day, and to which he is theoretically responsible for every official act. This freedom of life is a crowning glory of a professional career, prized as highly by its possessor as the liberal education which attends it. In the past, great ones of the earth have envied it; men have been willing to endure toil, poverty, and obscurity to possess it; and even in the present day those who enjoy it would often sacrifice much of mate-



rial good rather than let it go. I do not forget that there is one profession—historically so called—the marks of which are entirely different from those of which I have been speaking. This is the profession of arms. But I trust there is no need seriously to consider this as a type in principles and methods of what the teacher's calling is in danger of becoming. That would be *nejas* even to suggest. We do find ourselves, however, included in a system the effect of which is to deprive us to a greater or less degree of a professional status. It is useless to quarrel with this fact. The public-school system is a necessity, and its efficiency depends in part upon the thoroughness of its organization. There must be a final authority in educational matters in each city or town, and that final authority for practical purposes is apt to be the superintendent of schools.

But if our professional status is impaired, how about our professional feeling, the inward conviction that it is only the accident of our educational relationships which bars us from that full recognition by the great professional brotherhood to which the character and quality of our service entitle us? Do we really have this conviction, or is it smothered within us by acts and courses of action proceeding from above us which serve as a constant reminder that after all we are only subordinates in an official system, merely employees of a municipal corporation. The answer to this question rests, where there is one, with the superintendent of schools, and in seeking it we confront once more, not his authority, but his wisdom and discretion in exercising it. I repeat that the adjustment of the absolute authority on his part to the personal and social equality that he will find among his teachers, and to the preservation rather than the destruction of their professional spirit, is a problem that calls for extraordinary qualities and qualifications. He must have a competent professional education, but that should not be extraordinary. He must have firmness and the power of self-assertion necessary, but with these in his dealings with his teachers must be united uniform courtesy, consideration for their individualities of thought and temperament, sensitiveness to the effect of his own words, and intellectual humility. He should be wise, tactful, urbane, high-toned. In short, public-school teachers who are gentlemen and ladies have a right to expect that the man who is placed in authority over them shall himself be a gentleman by instinct

and breeding. If he is such, the danger to our professional feeling is reduced to its minimum.

On the other hand, education and business ability do not make a superintendent suited to our needs. If at the same time he has the disposition of a petty tyrant; or is jealous for his own prerogatives; or is underhanded; or is intellectually conceited and narrow; or is dictatorial and regardless in speech and manner; or is suspicious and interfering; or feels that he must justify his official existence by energetic officiousness; or, in other words, is not a refined and high-minded gentleman, the danger becomes a reality; we are lowered in fact, and are lowered in our own estimation. If I have set the standard for the superintendent of schools very high, it is no higher than we high-school men have the right to demand in the men who are placed over us. At least we should be able to see an evident desire and effort on the part of these men to reach this standard. Nothing less should satisfy them.

There are superintendents who approach the ideal. There may be many such, possibly very many.

Whatever infelicities characterize the relations of superintendent and high-school teachers, the school board is partly responsible for them, and should be held to account. School boards are pretty careful in looking up the record of candidates for a superintendency as far as their intellectual qualifications are concerned, and their apparent success in administering the local system from which they come. But I am persuaded that school boards often ignore the existence or non-existence of those personal qualities of which I have been speaking, and which are of such vital importance to the real success of the work with the high school. Further than this, the school board is too frequently content to delegate its powers to its executive officer and, having done so, to sever all direct connection with its teachers. It forgets that these teachers are as directly its appointees as the superintendent is, and that the superintendent is no less truly subordinate to the board than the teachers are. It forgets that delegated powers demand an oversight by the original and final authority, and that this oversight cannot be intelligently and conscientiously exercised without regard to the opinion and judgment of the teaching force. It is satisfied to accept without

further investigation the unsupported statements of the superintendent with regard to the work and needs of the schools and the efficiency of the teachers. It will do exactly this in the case of the high school, although the master of the school is in a position to know, and does know, very much more about every one of these points than the superintendent can know. It is the deliberate policy of some superintendents to make it as difficult as possible for teachers to come into direct contact with the school board, and to make themselves the sole channel through which complaint, request, or information shall come to its ears. This is entirely wrong, and no one suffers ultimately from it more than the superintendent himself.

It may safely be assumed that in any matter affecting the conduct of a good high school the consensus of the opinion or of the judgment of the faculty of that school would be of vastly more value than any other judgment or opinion whatsoever. A school board that is deprived of that consensus is imperfectly informed and imperfectly guided. I have never investigated the question, and therefore cannot speak with authority, but I wonder how many school boards are in the habit of seeking directly from the faculty of the high school, or its representatives, an expression of its judgment on important matters affecting its interests. I wonder how many superintendents would suggest or encourage such a practice. Yet it is necessary to a really enlightened administration of the school. Furthermore, it is folly to think that the mind of the school will reach the committee through the voice of the superintendent. However friendly he may be to the teachers of the high school, he is not one of them. His knowledge of them is limited, much more so than he thinks it is. His point of view and policy in regard to the affairs of the school may be different from theirs, and he will not act as their true or trustworthy representative because, if for no other reason, he cannot. And he does not.

It is a peculiar fact that of all classes of employees the public-school teachers in any community are alone without an organization or medium through which they can express themselves to the public which they serve. As far as uttering their complaints or expressing their desires is concerned, they are like dumb, driven cattle. An individual teacher may now and then lift his voice in plea or protest,

but his act is looked upon as of doubtful propriety, and the thought of consulting him or his co-workers with regard to the kind of man who is to be put in authority over them would be looked upon as impracticable and dangerous.

I am not for a moment arguing that the teaching force of a school is the proper body to determine the general policy of the school and the system. I am merely saying that the knowledge possessed by those teachers, their judgment, and their feeling are worth more for the enlightenment of the school authorities and the public than any other means of information, and that this enlightenment will rarely pass, except in a feeble and fitful way, through the medium of the superintendent.

Neither am I contending against the authority of the superintendent. This point I have tried to make very clear. I am only insisting that the more absolute the authority, the greater should be the care and discretion in its use, and the more delicate the adjustment of its relations. Nor, finally, am I belittling the greatness of the work that falls to the superintendent's lot or the potential value of that work to the high school. I am simply demanding that the man who seeks to take that work upon himself shall be fit for it, and that, if he is not fit for it in its entirety, he shall assume no more of it than he is fit for.

More than this no one can ask; and less than this no one has the moral right to impose upon the body of educated men and women who are doing the work of the public high school.